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ABSTRACT

The proper assessment of anxiety-causing behaviors will help the athlete and coach choose coping strategies which are most compatible with the particular problem and personality type of the individual. Suggestions most often include practical methods of describing and evaluating behaviors that differ from the norm so that cues signalling anxiety may be identified. These cues may be factors internal or external to the individual athlete within the personal or situational components of the competitive process. If an athlete perceives physiological symptoms of anxiety to be debilitating, then a program of deep muscle relaxation may be the best coping strategy to follow. Conversely, if an athlete has identified cognitive processes as the major problem, a cognitive problem-solving approach may be the method chosen. While either of these situations may occur, it is most likely athletes will identify both physiological and psychological processes that are generating stress. In this more prevalent instance, a combination of strategies may be the best method for dealing with the problem. Creative assessment of the problem will be the important first step in the process of implementing anxiety intervention programs. (Author)

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ASSESSMENT OF COMPETITIVE ANXIETY: PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR THE COACH

By
Deana Lorentzen

Proper assessment of competitive anxiety is the most important consideration in implementing anxiety behavioral management programs for athletes. It is essential that the coach and/or athlete correctly identify and describe maladaptive behaviors. Without this analysis, it is difficult to select coping strategies which are compatible with the personalities of the individual athletes and appropriate for the characteristics of the competitive events.

Coping strategies may be implemented either to help an athlete "psych up" or "psych down." In the past coaches commonly believed that athletic performance was always enhanced by increased arousal or "psyching up". That is, coaches assumed that there are no limits to how much teams or individuals can be aroused and that the higher the arousal level, the greater the expected performance. More recently such statements have been discredited. It has been found that the majority of problems related to competitive anxiety have occurred with the "over aroused" athlete rather than his or her "under aroused" counterpart (Fisher, 1976). For this reason many of the coping strategies used today deal with "psyching down" the athlete. This is not to say that certain individuals do not need help in stimulating or increasing arousal. In either instance assessment procedures should be used to help the coach identify the direction of the problem.

A definition of competitive anxiety must necessarily include the widely accepted concept of trait-state anxiety (Spielberger, 1970). This concept

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proposes that general tendencies to be anxious must be distinguished from immediate or situational states of anxiety. Martens (1977) defines state anxiety as "an existing or current emotional state characterized by feelings of apprehension and tension, and associated with activation of the organism (activation of the autonomic nervous system)." Trait anxiety is defined as "a predisposition to perceive certain environmental stimuli as threatening or non-threatening and to respond to these stimuli with varying levels of state anxiety." Trait anxiety is thus stable and similar to a personality attribute while state anxiety is situational and entirely dependent on how an individual perceives a particular event. In a competitive situation the entire process that is associated with the occurrence of state-anxiety is the primary interest and is thus emphasized in assessment procedures.

The causes of competitive anxiety and their effect on performance are highly complex and involve various person/situation components that interact in differing degrees among different individuals. Understanding the intricacies of this relationship may seem to be an insurmountable task. However, some practical suggestions for coaches on how to assess competitive anxiety can be made by summarizing ideas which have been presented in various sport specific anxiety intervention programs. This can best be accomplished by conceptualizing sports performance into various component parts for analysis, that is, the competitive process, situational factors, and the personal factors which affect anxiety. The following analysis has been necessarily simplified in order to emphasize ideas for assessment. For a more in-depth analysis of the competitive process and sport movement patterns see Martens (1977) and Suinn (1980).

The Competitive Process

Several researchers (Duffy, 1957; Selye, 1976; Becker, 1976; Borkovec, 1976) have noted the importance of the rolesof physiological arousal, cognitive processes, their interactions, and the importance of individual differences in those variables in determining the maintenance and reduction of anxiety. This implies that the roots of anxiety are genetic, cultural or situational, and characterological (personal). Past and present factors as well as external and internal causes have to be considered. It is recognized that a coach cannot change genetic factors, but he or she can use some strategies to deal with too little or too much arousal (in order to "psych up" or "psych down") after assessing the situational and personal components of anxiety in their athletes.

Situational Components of Anxiety

The situational components of anxiety include those aspects of the competitive process which are external to the individual. The nature of the task, situation and physical environment are all important areas to be considered when assessing competitive anxiety.

Characteristics of the particular competitive task have been shown to be related to anxiety in certain individuals (Bunker & Rotella, 1979). For instance, within specific situations, psychological threats which are ego-involving have been found to evoke more state-anxiety than physical threats which are non-ego-involving (Spielberger, 1970). For the individual athlete this fact has special implications which are closely related to

how he or she perceives the importance of the competitive outcome. The individual sport athlete bears the entire responsibility for the success or failure of a contest whereas the team sport athlete shares this responsibility with several team members. This dimension of the individual sports environment more easily facilitates the manifestation of state-anxiety as compared to that of team sports when the athlete's perception of the outcome is negative.

The precise or repetitive nature of the particular task may also be a cause for differing anxiety levels of athletes in these sports. Martens (1978) has noted that there are defferences in optimal arousal levels as the precision of motor control increases or decreases. Most individual sports fall into this "precision" category and can be illustrated by executing a complex skill in gymnastics or diving, putting in golf and shooting in archery. These skills require intense concentration or focus on detail and would be best performed under lower arousal levels. Exceptions include swimming and running events which are repetitive in nature. Such activities are not as precise and would optimally be performed under higher levels of arousal. These aspects of the nature of the task cannot be precisely assessed but should be recognized as probable causes of anxiety.

The nature of the situation with regard to performance or learning and level of competition are other aspects of the competitive process to consider when trying to assess probable causes of anxiety. Most athletes find certain aspects of the competitive environment more threatening than situations encountered in training. The anxiety experienced during practice

sessions is usually different from that observed during actual competition. Identification of the differences is important because coping strategies have been described which are most beneficial in learning situations whereas others are best utilized in performance situations.

The level of competition as well as the experience level of the athlete should be assessed due to the potential for damaging competitive anxiety. When competing against opponents who are apparently superior, the athlete may attempt to perform skills with increased task difficulty and therefore increased arousal results. Conversely, against inferior competitors, the athlete may exhibit lower arousal than that needed for good performance. In these cases different "psyching" approaches should be employed. Moreover, their use must be compatible with the experience level of the athlete. Generally novices tend to perform at an optimum level of arousal when competing against athletes of approximately their same ability level while more experienced athletes usually need the added excitement of a higher level of competition to perform their best.

The nature of the physical environment including the presence of other individuals can be highly arousing for many athletes. Adverse weather condition, poor or different equipment, crowd noise and photographers fall into this category. Coaches and athletes should discuss aspects of the physical environment before each competition to assess their importance as a probable cause of anxiety. Suggestions from team members on how to deal with these problems may then be implemented in simulated or actual conditions before the competition takes place. Many times simply knowing what to expect of

the physical surroundings can alleviate anxiety symptoms.

The presence of other individuals has a marked impact on performance and is based on the nature and importance of these "significant others". For example, beginners tend to perform at lower levels when others are present, especially if those present are serving in an evaluative capacity (Martens, 1978). The most practical suggestion that can be made in this area is to know the athlete as an individual by carefully observing his or her reactions in different performance and practice situations when others are present. A coach can then help the athlete recognize these different reactions and their probable causes. Proper assessment of the anxiety producing situational components can facilitate the assessment of anxiety producing personal components.

Personal Components of Anxiety

Personal components of the competitive process are internal to the individual and may be physiological, cognitive or behavioral. All three interact and, as a unit, relate to how the athlete perceives the external or situational components previously discussed.

Physiological manifestations of state-anxiety may be indicated by a myriad of factors including changes in heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, respiration, finger temperature and palmar sweating. Baseline or normal physiological measures should be assessed so that deviations from these norms may be more easily discerned. Self-monitoring of physiological and muscular responses to stress should be carefully noted by the partici-

pant before, during and after both learning and performance situations. The individual will then be better able to sense physiological cues signaling anxiety. Simply taking one's pulse or recording and describing the sensations of stressful moments can be valuable. Small, inexpensive biofeedback devices are now available and have been used successfully in many sport related situations (Wenz & Strong, 1980). These involve nothing more than a way to provide the athlete with information about what is going on inside the body (Nideffer & Sharpe, 1978). The athlete and the coach must work together to carefully evaluate all the available evidence so that decisions on appropriate strategies for behavior management can be made. Changes in physiological symptoms may indicate the presence of maladaptive cognitions which are occurring during the competitive process.

Cognitive responses are the psychological demands in the organized set of thought processes needed for effective performance (Bunker & Rotella, 1979). Internal self-statements, images, and thoughts and feelings occurring prior to, during, and following a particular event are encompassed in this category. For instance, Smith & Smoll (1978) have indicated internal self-statements generating a stress response generally relate to fear of failure and/or disapproval. Worrying and dwelling on catastrophic results or failure seem to dominate the thought patterns of many high stress athletes and interfere with task oriented thinking and attention.

Suggestions for identifying the thought processes that signal anxiety include self-observation by the coach and athlete during practice and before performance situations. Designating one day a week in practice to take care-

ful notes on physiological changes and internal self-statements related to relaxed and aroused states is a good way to initiate assessment. Coaches can then set aside certain times to meet with each athlete to discuss his or her responses and to identify those occurring most frequently. O'Hara and Orlick (unpublished manuscript) have suggested that high anxious individuals are more self-focused, more occupied with self-comparison, make more negative self-statements, and have more concerns about autonomic reactions. These descriptions of highly aroused individuals can provide the perceptive coach with clues for evaluating the athlete's level of stress.

Social concerns or personal relationships in sport are an integral part of the personal component of anxiety in the competitive process. These are important problem sources of anxiety because they are often overlooked by coaches. The social concerns should be assessed in relation to the feelings of an athlete about his or her relationship with the coach and the other athletes on a team. Wenz and Strong (1980) have noted that group discussions have proven most successful for eliminating problems in this area and suggest inclusion of the following topics:

1.) Feelings and attitudes about the particular sport, competition worries, and ways of working with each other to reduce pressure.

2.) Levels of aspiration, goal achievement and goal setting in order to differentiate between personal and team goals.

3.) Needs for power, affiliation and achievement.

During the group discussions coaches should point out unrealistic personal goals. It is important that these be identified because of their relation-

ship to expectations for future success. These expectations may in turn affect self-confidence and locus of control. Emphasis should be on moving from an external locus of control (where outcomes are believed to be controlled by forces outside oneself) to an internal one (when the individual believes the outcomes are contingent upon his or her own behavior).

Note taking, group discussions, personal interviews or talks, and observation have been identified as the major assessment tools by authors of sport intervention programs. It is up to the coach to implement these suggestions at appropriate times and in the most beneficial way for use in his or her particular situation.

Conclusions

The proper assessment of anxiety causing behaviors will help the athlete and coach choose coping strategies which are most compatible with the particular problem and personality type of the individual. Suggestions most often include practical methods of describing and evaluating behaviors that differ from the norm so that cues signaling anxiety may be identified. These cues may be factors internal or external to the individual athlete within the personal or situational components of the competitive process. If an athlete perceives physiological symptoms of anxiety to be debilitating, then a program of deep muscle relaxation may be the best coping strategy to follow. Conversely, if an athlete has identified cognitive processes as the major problem a cognitive problem-solving approach may be the method of choice. While either of these situations may occur, it is most likely

athletes will identify both physiological and psychological processes that are generating stress. In this more prevalent instance a combination of strategies may be the best method for dealing with the problem. Whatever the method selected, creative assessment of the problem will be the important first step in the process of implementing anxiety intervention programs.

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